

Veterans Day lets us recognize sacrifices of children with parents in the military

by — MOIRA E. MCLAUGHLIN
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Sunday is Veterans Day. For some of you, that means you get Monday off from school, but for Americans everywhere, it's a chance to say, “Thank you” to people who serve or have served in the U.S. military.

Veterans Day dates back to 1919, when President Woodrow Wilson wanted to set aside a day to honor the soldiers who fought in World War I. In 1954, Congress passed a law making November 11 a day to honor U.S. veterans of all wars.

About 2.5 million men and women serve in the U.S. military right now, and about 23 million veterans, or people who have served, are still living today. That's a lot of people who have worked to protect the country. There also are 500,000 kids between the ages of 6 and 13 whose parents serve in the military. Because of all the military bases in Maryland, Virginia and Washington, thousands of them live in this area. For those kids, Veterans Day is a day to remember not just the sacrifices their moms and dads have made for their country but also the sacrifices that they have made.

Good and bad

Alex O'Donnell, 12, is a seventh-grader at Robinson Secondary School in Fairfax. His mom has served in the Air Force his entire life. Being in a military family “definitely feels special,” he says. “The only question is, is it good or bad? It's good because when my mom gets deployed, I'm serving my duty, and then it's bad because my mom gets deployed.”

“Deployed” means that Alex's mom, Tamara O'Donnell, has to go far away from home for a long time, leaving Alex's dad to take care of him and his two older sisters. A few years ago, Alex's mom spent a year and three

months away from home, first in Turkey and then in Kyrgyzstan (sounds like kur-gi-stahn), which is about 7,000 miles away! Alex's mom, who is a major, wasn't home to help with homework. She's wasn't home to tuck Alex in at night. And she wasn't home to make sure he got up in time for school every morning. Instead, the family relied on video chats to stay connected. Alex's mom even read books to Alex and his sisters over video when she was away. "When she left that night, I cried the whole night," Alex remembers. "And then when she came back, the sad thing was, I didn't recognize her at first."

Family help

Braden Marsh's dad, Charles "Chuck" Marsh, served in Afghanistan for eight months about three years ago. Being more than 7,000 miles from home meant that Marsh, a master sergeant in the Air Force, couldn't exactly be home for dinner every night. Now, Braden is a third-grader at Stratford Landing Elementary School in Alexandria. What he remembers about his dad's time away is that his grandparents helped take care of him and his little sister, Abby. Like Alex's family, they video chatted to stay in touch.

Jessica Tisak is 20 years old and goes to college in Pennsylvania, but she remembers clearly when she was a kid in Maryland and her dad, Francis Tisak, a Navy captain, was home for only about three months in two years. Her dad missed piano recitals, birthdays and even Jessica's older sister's high school graduation.

"It was hard," Jessica says. But she relied on her mom and two older sisters to help her get through. "Your family is the biggest rock you can count on," she says. "Nothing beats your family."

Jessica remembers that her dad would hide short letters in the house for her to find after he was gone, saying things like "Hi, hope you're being good, helping your mom. I love you always."

Moving around

Being in a military family not only means possibly being separated from a parent, it also means the whole family might have to move pretty often. People in the military have to go wherever they are needed. That's why in 18 years, Jessica lived in nine places, and in 12 years, Alex already has lived in six.

Jessica says you get used to moving. "Once two or three years were up, I would ask my dad where we were going to move next. That's something that military kids deal with, but it's something you learn to cope with the older you get."

Christina Sayles, a sixth-grader at John Hanson Middle School in Waldorf, knows about moving away from her school and her friends. Her mom, Cindy Sayles, is a senior chief petty officer in the Navy; because of that, Christina moved from Illinois to Maryland a couple years ago. She still misses her old home.

"I really didn't like leaving Illinois," she says. "It was a big deal to move. . . . I want to move back."

There is a positive side to moving, according to Alex, who moved to Virginia four months ago from Alabama. "You get to meet a lot of new people," he says.

Alex has already met a new best friend here, Brittany. "But I end up forgetting about a lot of people I end up leaving behind," he says.

Pride

Braden, Christina, Jessica and Alex are all proud of their parents, even though it has not always been easy for them to be part of military life.

Alex thinks he may join the Army when he grows up. Or, because he likes math and science, maybe he will be an aerospace engineer. His mom's career "seems like something so simple that's really easy to do, but it has such a big impact," he says. "I find it very honorable, but it's kind of [hard]

for us.”

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<http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/kidspost/veterans-day-lets-us-recognize-sacrifices-of-children-with-parents-in-the-military/2012/11/08/148b1c80-22c7-11e2-bdfa-eebc58545bc7_story.html>.

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